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ABSTRACT

"Vision" is one of the most frequently used buzzwords in the education literature of the 1990s. This digest presents an overview of visionary leadership, which many education experts consider to be a make-or-break task for the school leader. It discusses various definitions of vision, the significance of vision for organizations, the ways in which visions develop, the top-down and bottom-up nature of vision, and the ways in which leaders facilitate vision. An organizational vision creates a more unified school culture and serves as a way to reconnect schools to an increasingly alienated public. Although involving teachers in the formulation of a school's vision is important, the principal clearly plays an important role in initiating and promoting it. Above all, principals must create a climate and a culture for change. (Contains 11 references.) (LMI)

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Visionary Leadership

By Larry Lashway

When some future historian tallies up buzzwords of the 1990s, "vision" will be high on the list. Schools everywhere want leaders who have it, and even modest incremental plans are routinely billed as "visions for the 21st century." Unfortunately, the exaltation of vision often leaves one question unanswered: Once you're done praising it, what do you do about it?

David Conley (1996) has found that many school leaders have become ambivalent—sometimes even cynical—about the usefulness of vision. Yet experts continue to regard it as a make-or-break task for the leader.

What's in a Vision?

Conley says that vision exists when people in an organization share an explicit agreement on the values, beliefs, purposes, and goals that should guide their behavior. More simply, he calls it "an internal compass."

Thomas Sergiovanni (1994) characterizes vision as an "educational platform" that incorporates the school's beliefs about the preferred aims, methods, and climate, thereby creating a "community of mind" that establishes behavioral norms.

Kathryn Whitaker and Monte Moses (1994) call it "an inspiring declaration of a compelling dream, accompanied by a clear scenario of how it will be accomplished." A good vision not only has worthy goals, but also challenges and stretches everyone in the school.

Why Does Vision Matter?

Robert Fritz (1996) says that organizations advance when a clear, widely understood vision creates tension between the real and the ideal, pushing people to work together to reduce the gap.

This unifying effect is especially important in school settings known for their "isolationist culture." Because teachers typically regard methodology as a matter of individual preference, empowerment strategies do not quickly lead to schoolwide changes in classroom practices (Carol Weiss 1995).

By contrast, schools with a clear vision have a standard by which teachers can gauge their own efforts. According to one teacher in a school that had recently developed a vision, "People are speaking the same language, they have the same kinds of informal expectations for one another, more common ground" (Conley and colleagues 1992).

David Mathews (1996) sees vision as a way of reconnecting schools to an increasingly alienated public. He says communities no longer see the schools as their schools. A vision that reflects the needs and purposes of the surrounding community not only improves education, it rebuilds the relationship between the school and its public.

How Do Visions Develop?

Many leaders believe vision development is a straightforward task of articulating a statement of beliefs and then implementing it. However, some studies suggest that vision is more of an evolutionary process than a one-time event, a process that requires continuous reflection, action, and reevaluation. Laraine Hong (1996) describes it as "purposeful tinkering." Through dozens of little experiments, "each day is an opportunity to come closer to your perceived ideal."

Written statements are a logical first step, but Fritz warns that they often turn into political compromises that trivialize the vision through "weak, watered-down, simplistic declarations." Moreover, the immediacy of student needs gives K-12 educators a strong bias toward action; extended discussions of philosophy create impatience. Conley and colleagues found a number of schools that began acting on their vision several years before articulating it in writing.

Both talk and action are necessary. Marie Wincek describes a school where the vision faltered because of too little discussion. The experienced and competent staff eagerly jumped into the "nuts and bolts" of implementation without examining whether they interpreted the vision the same way. Thus, they were unprepared for the inevitable disagreements and ambiguities that arose.

On the other hand, Conley says that some schools become mired in "analysis paralysis," recycling the same old discussions and hesitating to commit themselves to action. Not every detail and every anxiety can be resolved beforehand, and the vision can be modified as the school learns from experience.

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Is Vision Top-Down or Bottom-Up?

Many people assume vision springs from the mind of a strong leader with the imagination, energy, and charisma to jump-start the organization into a major transformation. Others advocate a shared process in which everyone is a co-author. However, "either/or" thinking may be counterproductive.

Clearly, the principal plays a pivotal role in shaping the vision—sometimes single-handedly. In the hands of an articulate, persuasive leader, a distinctive personal vision may be far more attractive than a something-for-everyone group product. As long as the vision is one that people in the organization can embrace, authorship is irrelevant (Fritz). However, principals with "heroic" inclinations must be willing to release personal ownership when the time comes for implementation, or teachers will not commit to it (Conley).

There are also good reasons to involve teachers at the outset, since they are the ones who must ultimately translate abstract ideas into practical classroom applications, and they can do this better when they are actively involved in developing the vision (Conley and colleagues).

No matter who creates the vision, the principal is its chief instigator, promoter, and guardian. In her study of shared decision-making, Weiss found that little changed unless the principal took the lead and actively pushed. Apparently, empowered teachers may act on individual visions, but they do not spontaneously create shared visions.

In the end, many principals may follow the example of Hong's principal: "Anne had to know when to suggest, when to nudge, when to wait. She had to be assertive enough to push us a few steps forward, but indirect and patient enough to let us find our own way."

How Do Leaders Facilitate Vision?

Even in schools that are deeply committed to shared vision, principals remain the key players, both before and after the school adopts a new direction.

Creating readiness is crucial. Conley notes that principals who have already adjusted to new ways of thinking often underestimate the time needed for others to do the same. He says that all participants must have the opportunity to examine their current thinking, develop a rationale for change, and entertain new models. This can be done by forming study groups, visiting schools or businesses that have already restructured, or collecting data that challenge comfortable assumptions (such as test scores or surveys of community satisfaction).

Robert Starratt (1995) emphasizes the importance of institutionalizing the vision. No matter how inspiring it sounds on paper, the dream will wither unless it takes concrete form in policies, programs, and procedures. At some point, curriculum, staffing, evaluation, and budget must feel the imprint of the vision, or it will gradually lose credibility.

At the same time, principals must remain focused on what the vision means in classroom terms. Richard Elmore and colleagues, after an indepth study of restructuring schools, concluded that enthusiasm for new visions does not automatically lead people to see the implications for teaching. They found that it was "extraordinarily difficult" for teachers to attain the deep, systematic knowledge of practice needed to make the vision a reality. Without unrelenting assessment, analysis, and professional development, the vision may remain a glossy facade rather than becoming a vital, living presence in the life of the school.

Above all, principals must create a climate and a culture for change. They do this by speaking about the vision often and enthusiastically; by encouraging experiments; by celebrating successes and forgiving failures; and by remaining steadfast in the face of the inevitable problems and missteps.

Experience has given advocates of vision a new appreciation for the difficulties involved, removing any illusions about a magic bullet. Yet they remain optimistic about its potential. As schools work through the challenges of vision, says Hong, "they discover that they perhaps can make the impossible possible."

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